

Humor

by Mont Lewis

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Humor



Abraham Lincoln's Humor

Lincoln's Humor by Mort
Lewis

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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To General McMurtrie
Cordial regards,
Mort Reis Lewis
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LINCOLN'S HUMOR

(Talk delivered by Mort Reis Lewis at the C.W.R.T.
of Southern California, November 21, 1957)

A favorite Lincoln story of mine is one that Lincoln told when he was in the Illinois State Legislature, in 1841. A certain member of the Legislature from Montgomery County, a Mr. Kitchell, gloried in being what he called a strict constitutionalist, and finding minute points which he used to question the constitutionality of practically every bill brought up on the floor. Lincoln took it upon himself to silence this troublesome confrere. His attack on a certain measure Lincoln was championing, a bond issue, reminded Lincoln of a story about an old friend of his -- a grizzled frontiersman, with bushy eyebrows and spectacles -- which by a curious coincidence, his fellow legislator also had. One day the old man imagined he saw a rather lively squirrel on a tree near his house -- and grabbing his gun, fired at the animal -- which apparently paid no attention and kept frisking. After firing perhaps a dozen times, he threw down his weapon in disgust, muttering there was something wrong with the rifle. His son, who'd been watching him said, "Rifle's all right, but where's your squirrel?" The old man said, "Can't you see him hanging from that tree?" "No, I don't," said the boy. Then looking at his father, he said, "Now I see your squirrel. You've been firing at a louse on your eyebrow!"

This is the classic Lincoln story -- classic, because it's pithy, it's pointed, it paints a picture, it's brief -- most of Lincoln's stories were short -- it's earthy, drawn from a background with which Lincoln was personally familiar -- easily understood -- and it had a moral. The big object you think you're aiming at may turn out just to be a louse on your own eyebrow.

This is a real Lincoln story, although only a fraction of those supposedly told by Lincoln, actually were.

While Lincoln was President, almost any good joke, and a lot of bad ones, were ascribed to Lincoln. Publishers issued such books as *Lincolniana*, or *Humors of Uncle Abraham*; and *Old Abe's Jokes*, *Fresh from Abraham's Bosom*; *Old Abe's Jokes*, or *Wit at the White House*, and others. Most of these jokes, Lincoln never told. The majority were so unfunny that Lincoln, on a bad day, suffering from varioloid, hypochondria and an onslaught of Mary Todd, wouldn't have told them. But the publishers wanted the reading public to think he had. It's like ascribing any sarcastically witty story to Groucho Marx; any gag about stinginess to Jack Benny. A joke is so quickly told, the listener must be familiar with its elements if it is to be understood. He has little chance to mull over it.

The listener knowing what Lincoln looked like, possibly what he sounded like, having a notion of his character, he was immediately visualized. This added another dimension of familiarity to the story, and the laugh came more quickly. A story also borrows importance from its teller or the person about whom it's told.

Besides, Lincoln was a funny man, and if he told the story, and you liked Lincoln, the story was half sold as comic, before you even read it.

We Americans like our Presidents to have idiosyncrasies, or hobbies, which we can identify with our own or because of which we may feel superior. It boosts the national ego. Eisenhower is a golfer; Truman played the piano; Hoover was a fisherman; Wilson read detective yarns; and Lincoln told funny stories. It helps keep alive the legend that we are all potted from the same common clay.

According to Noah Brooks, Lincoln said that perhaps a sixth of the stories credited to him were yarns he told, or at least were legal tender in his treasury of yarns. This isn't a direct quote. Just the idea. Among the five-sixth of the Lincoln stories he didn't tell, but which have passed into American folklore as true Lincoln stories, is the one about Grant and his whiskey -- the protest having been made that the general drank too much -- and Lincoln's supposed reply that he'd like to find out what brand it was, so he could send some to his other generals. David Homer Bates, one of Lincoln's telegraphers, in his book "Lincoln In The Telegraph Office", says that the president, quote, "disclaimed this story in my hearing, stating that King George III of England was said to have remarked, when told that General Wolfe, then in command of the English army in Canada, was mad, that he wished Wolfe would bite some of his other generals." This is what comedy writers call "a switch" of an old story -- a twist, in which the basic elements are retained, but the story made applicable to a different person

or situation. Of course, there is no doubt some of the stories Lincoln actually told were switches of old stories, but the whiskey anecdote was not one of them.

Noah Brooks quotes Lincoln as saying, "I remember a good story when I hear it, but I never invented anything original." I don't believe this. If Lincoln said such a thing, then he did so in a moment of extreme modesty. Certainly he had a creative sense of humor.

When Lincoln and Douglas were political opponents, Douglas remarked that in early life, his father -- a cooper -- had apprenticed him out to learn the cabinet business. Lincoln, too good a political boxer not to take advantage of such an opening, let go with this uppercut: "I had understood before that Mr. Douglas had been bound out to learn the cabinet-making business, which is all well enough, but I was not aware until now that his father was a cooper. I have no doubt, however, that he was one, and I am also certain he was a very good one, for -- (bowing toward Douglas) -- he has made one of the best whiskey casks I have ever seen."

Another time, the Little Giant, appealing to the perverse morality of a crowd that certainly included many staunch members of the John Barleycorn fan club, titillated his listeners by telling them that, when he first knew Mr. Lincoln, he was "a grocerykeeper" and sold whiskey, cigars and such. Mr. Lincoln, he said, was a very good bartender. The implication being that Lincoln should have remained one and not had the temerity to run for office. But Douglas had led with his right, and Lincoln countered with this, "What Mr.

Douglas has said, gentlemen, is true enough. I did keep a grocery and I did sell cotton, candles, and cigars and sometimes whiskey; but I remember in those days, that Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers! Many a time have I stood on one side of the counter and sold whiskey to Douglas on the other side, but the difference between us now is this: I have left my side of the counter, but Mr. Douglas still sticks to his as tenaciously as ever." Tangling with Lincoln was like playing with a porcupine and expecting not to wind up a pincushion.

In refusing a man who wanted a pass to Richmond, Lincoln replied, "I would gladly give you the pass if it would do any good. But in the last two years I have given passes to Richmond to 250,000 men and not one of them has managed to get there yet."

In the days when Lincoln was one of the shining legal lights of the Eighth Circuit, his law associate in Danville, Ward Hill Lamon, tore the seat of his breeches during some horseplay in front of the courthouse. A petition was passed around among the lawyers, requesting contributions for the repair of the damaged trousers, whereupon Lincoln wrote, "I can contribute nothing to the end in view."

That Lincoln's ready and original wit could demolish an opponent in the courtroom, who provoked him, is shown in this incident: On one occasion, a lawyer challenged a juror because of his personal acquaintance with Lincoln who was the lawyer for the other side. In those days, unlike today, such an objection was looked upon as a reflection upon the honor of an attorney and Judge Davis over-ruled the challenge. When Lincoln examined the jury,

he asked the talesmen whether they were acquainted with his opponent. After several had admitted they were, Judge Davis interfered, saying, "Now, Mr. Lincoln, you are wasting time. The mere fact that a juror knows your opponent, does not disqualify him." "No, your Honor," was Lincoln's reply. "But I am afraid some of the gentlemen may not know him, which would place me at a disadvantage."

These are a few examples of the true Lincolnian original humor. Most of Lincoln's humorous remarks, some of them authentically witty, were spontaneous. He had a creative, humorous talent. And a creative talent for humor, can be restrained no more than bubbles in freshly carbonated water can be kept from rising to the top. That's why I believe that, at least some of the stories Lincoln told, came from the rich loam of his own mind, fertilized by his particular experiences.

It's said that, when Lincoln told a story he'd heard from someone else, he made it peculiarly his own -- he changed it somewhat -- he added to it. Now most of us do that. We rarely tell a story exactly the way it was told to us. But a master story teller improves the original. And Lincoln was a master. A. J. Conant, a government official in Washington during the Civil War, told Lincoln a story, which the President enjoyed and re-told, giving due credit to Conant, by the way. That alone, would seem to make Lincoln deserve the nickname "Honest Abe". The story concerned a man who hoped to become a county judge and who hired a horse and buggy to drive to the nominating convention, held in a town some sixteen miles away. He asked the livery-stable keeper to give him the best and fastest horse he had, and this is Lincoln's

addition, explaining that he was anxious to get there early and do a little log rolling - campaigning - before the meeting opened.

His neighbor, again Lincoln's addition, - being of opposing politics - had other views, and furnished him with a beast which, starting out very well, broke down utterly. Long before he reached his destination, the convention had adjourned, and of course he lost the nomination. It was late the following afternoon before they pulled up in front of the stable. The candidate handed the reins over to his neighbor, remarking, "Jones, I see you are training this horse for the New York market. I know you expect to sell him for a good price to an undertaker for a hearse-horse." In vain the owner protested. "Don't deny it," said the would-be judge. "I know by his gait how much time you have spent training him to go before a hearse. But it is all labor lost, my friend. He is altogether too slow. Why, this horse couldn't get a corpse to the cemetery in time for the resurrection!"

The few words that Lincoln added to this story, the fact that the candidate explained he was anxious to get there early and do a little log rolling before the meeting opened, and that the livery stable keeper was of opposing politics, described the motives of the two men and therefore made the story considerably funnier. Only a master story teller would have the talent to do that.

Lincoln's sense of humor was as much and as important a part of the sum total of his character, as his sensitivity to tragedy. The man who, when he was a lawyer, could weep sincerely over the plight of a deserving client in desperate straits; who for reasons, which even he didn't know, would plumb the depths of misery --

a victim, as he called it, of the "hypo"; who when told by Governor Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania, newly arrived from the battlefield of Fredericksburg, of the "butchery" in that fatal engagement, in Curtin's own words was "heart-broken at the recital and soon reached a state of nervous excitement, bordering on insanity"; this man loved to laugh -- needed laughter. Laughter was Lincoln's medicine. He, himself, said to a congressman, scandalized by Lincoln's story-telling, "If it were not for this occasional vent, I should die." An Illinois cavalry colonel, John F. Farnsworth, quoted Lincoln as saying, "A funny story, if it has the element of genuine wit, has the same effect on me, that I suppose a good square drink has on an old toper; it puts new life into me."

It was the shining obverse side of the coin that would have otherwise been almost completely oxidized by the dank air of gloom. There was nothing sham about Lincoln's laughter, either. Carpenter, the artist, said "Lincoln's laugh stood out by itself." The "neigh of a wild horse on its native prairie is not more disguised and hearty."

His sense of humor helped preserve his sanity. According to Sandburg, after Governor Curtin had described the slaughter at Fredericksburg, and Lincoln's despondency at the news, Curtin had added that he would give all he owned to rescue the President from "this terrible war". This last statement struck a chord in Lincoln, and his saving grace of humor came to his aid, to restore a balance with grief. Curtin relates that Lincoln said, "This reminds me, Governor, of an old farmer out in Illinois, I used to know. He took it into his head to go into hog raising. He sent

to Europe and imported the finest breed of hogs he could buy. The prize hog was put in a pen and the farmer's two mischievous boys, James and John, were told to be sure and not let him out. But James, the worse of the two, let the brute out the next day. The hog went straight for the boys and drove John up a tree. Then the hog went for the seat of James' trousers, and the only way the boy could save himself was by holding on to the hog's tail. The hog would not give up his hunt, nor the boy his hold. After they had made a good many circles around the tree, the boy's courage began to give out and he shouted to his brother, "I say, John, come down quick and help me let this hog go!" And Lincoln added to Curtin, "No, Governor, that is exactly my case. I wish someone would come down and help me let this hog go."

Although this certainly isn't one of the funniest of Lincoln's stories, the art of the master story teller is apparent in it. The farmer "sent to Europe and imported the finest breed of hogs he could buy." This isn't necessary, but it adds to reality -- helps to round out the story. It was James, "the worse of the two mischievous boys" who let the prize pig out. There you have characterization. Lincoln's stories were more like short stories than like jokes. A picture is generally more easily, more quickly understood than mere words -- and Lincoln undertook to draw word pictures. For Lincoln, the need to be understood was imperative. He early discovered, even before becoming a lawyer, that by telling a story that was a simile, or a parable, if you will, a point could be explained -- made clear -- more easily digested -- than otherwise. This was the Aesop fable technique, and Lincoln read

and enjoyed Aesop's Fables. He was also a great Bible reader, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Lincoln was somewhat influenced in the direction of his story telling, as simple means of explanation, by the fact that parables are so used in the Bible.

Here's an example of how Lincoln used a parable or simile in the courtroom, as a homely way of making a situation more easily understood by a jury. In an assault and battery case he was defending, Lincoln was able to prove the plaintiff was the aggressor, but the opposing attorney argued that the defendant should have protected himself without injuring his assailant. Lincoln refuted this by describing the defendant as being in the situation of a man, who in going along the highway carrying a pitchfork, had been attacked by a fierce dog, that ran out at him from a farmer's dooryard. In warding off the dog with the pitchfork, he had killed the dog.

The indignant farmer asked, "What made you kill my dog?"

"What made him bite me?" was the answer.

"But why didn't you go after him with the other end of the pitchfork?"

And the answer, "Why didn't he come at me with his other end?" This simple example of what is legally known as "son assault demesne" -- his assault diminished -- or the other fellow started it, in this instance, helped win Lincoln's case for him.

Lincoln told stories sometimes for the sheer enjoyment of telling them. Somebody would relate a funny yarn; Lincoln would match it. His ideas in stories seemed to run, so it has been said, in couples, "like animals entering the ark". His fund of stories

seemed almost endless -- as in the case of Jimmy Durante, he appeared to have "a million of 'em." Actually, he said his store was limited to a few hundred. Where did he acquire them, and why -- the ones he didn't originate himself?

In his early life, Lincoln lived in or near villages and small towns, places like Gentryville, Indiana and New Salem, Illinois. The people, mostly, had to entertain themselves. There were footraces, "rasslin'" matches, turkey shoots, infares and other simple social functions -- and there was the courthouse.

But the story teller was movies, radio and television all rolled into one. He was the prime source of entertainment, and if he was really good, was quite likely to be the most popular man in the place.

Lincoln had examples in his own family -- his Uncle Mordecai and his father Thomas -- both prime story tellers, both well liked in their communities. Lincoln many times introduced a homely witticism by saying, "As my old father used to say", whether he actually had said it or not. Thomas was a convenient peg on which to hang a backwoods gag. In one of Lincoln's early campaign biographies, appears this statement, referring to the candidate: "From his father came that knack of story telling which has made him so delightful among acquaintances and so irresistible in his stump and forensic drolleries." Lincoln, correcting this biography, let that statement stand.

Lincoln had enough ego to want to be popular. Besides, he had a hankering for politics, and a well developed ability to tell good, funny stories meant votes. One of the stories Lincoln told

in New Salem was the "lizard" story -- a fine example of the kind of yarn Lincoln and his audience enjoyed.

As Lincoln related it, it all happened in a meeting house in the woods -- a meeting house that was used only once a month. The preacher -- an old line Baptist -- was dressed in coarse linen pantaloons and shirt of the same material. The pants, manufactured after the old fashion, with baggy legs and a flap in front, were made to attach to his frame without the aid of suspenders. A single button held his shirt in position and that was at the collar. He rose up in the pulpit and announced his text, thus: "I am the Christ, whom I shall represent today." About this time, a little blue lizard ran up underneath his baggy pantaloons. The old preacher, not wishing to interrupt the steady flow of his sermon, slapped away on his legs, expecting to arrest the intruder, but his efforts were unavailing, and the little fellow kept on ascending higher and higher. Continuing the sermon, the preacher slyly loosened the central button which graced the waist band of his pantaloons -- and with a kick, off came that easy-fitting garment.

But meanwhile, Mr. Lizard had passed the equatorial line of waistband and was calmly exploring that part of the preacher's anatomy which lay underneath the back of his shirt. Things were now growing interesting, but the sermon was still grinding on. The next movement on the preacher's part was for the collar button, and with one sweep of his arm, off came the tow linen shirt. The congregation sat for an instant, as if dazed; at length, one old lady in the rear of the room rose up, and glancing at the excited

object in the pulpit, shouted at the top of her voice: "If you represent Christ, I'm done with the Bible."

Lincoln, according to Herndon's cousin, had but recently come to New Salem when he told the lizard story -- and it, and others as funny, helped establish his popularity.

Lincoln acquired many of his stories, of course, from other wags. For instance, his fellow attorney Henry Clay Whitney said, "He himself introduced me to Mr. Hacker, of Union County, whom he had known in the Legislature, and said he: 'This is the man who learned me nearly all of my funny stories.'"

Some stories Lincoln mined from books he read -- such as Joe Miller's Jests, published 1739, or Quin's Jests, which contained jokes and repartee of the Irish actor James Quin, published in 1776 in London. From "Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi" by Baldwin, he got the story of a judge who was such a strict legalist he would convict a man for blowing his nose on the street, but would quash the indictment, if it failed to state what hand he blew it with.

Undoubtedly, most of these stories underwent considerable revision before they rolled off Lincoln's droll tongue, although their ancestry was apparent.

For instance, the story Lincoln told about the man who defended himself against the dog with his pitchfork, appears in "Joe Miller's Jests, or the Wit's Vade-Mecum," in this form: "A dog coming open-mouth'd at a Serjeant upon a March, he run the Spear of his Halbert into his Throat and kill'd him: The Owner coming out, rav'd extreamly that his Dog was Kill'd and ask'd the

Serjeant, 'Why he could not as well have stuck him with the blunt End of his Halbert?' 'So I would,' says he, 'if he had run at me with his Tail.'"

Lincoln, a fan of Joe Miller's Jests, simply brought this story up to date for his 19th century rural audience.

Lincoln made more of a "switch" with another drollery from Joe Miller. He would tell a story about a man who came up to him -- Lincoln -- in a railroad car, and bearing a jack-knife. The stranger said he had been given the knife to keep until he found someone uglier than he was, and handing it to Lincoln, added, "Here it is, sir. It is fairly yours."

This yarn appears in another form, in Joe Miller. In Joe Miller's Jests, this story is told: "The Lord N-th and G-y, being once at an Assembly at the Theatre Royal in the Hay-Market, was pleased to tell Mr. H-- d--gg--r, he wou'd make him a present of 100 pounds if he could produce an uglier Face in the whole Kingdom than his, the said H-- d-- gg-- r went instantly and fetch'd a Looking Glass and presented it to his Lordship, saying, 'He did not doubt but his Lordship had Honour enough to keep his Promise.'"

This story is partly based on the idea of the ugly man making a present to someone uglier than he is -- and is actually funnier than the Lincoln switch, because it has more of a surprise element, inasmuch as H turned the tables unexpectedly on Lord N--.

This one and another joke in "Quin's Jests" were the antecedents of a Lincoln version of an occurrence in which Daniel Webster was supposedly involved. (This, by the way, is an example of Lincoln's hanging a joke on an important name, to give the story

more impact.)

The President told a group, including Chittenden, Register of the Treasury, a yarn about Daniel Webster, as a schoolboy being called up by the teacher to have his hand struck with a ruler. Daniel's hands happened to be very dirty and en route to receive his punishment, Webster spit on his right hand and wiped off some of the dirt on his pantaloons. Daniel stuck out his right hand, partly cleansed, to the teacher and prepared to have it struck. The teacher, scandalized, said, "Daniel, if you will find another hand in this school-room dirtier than this one, I'll let you off this time." Instantly Webster put out his left hand and said, "Here it is, sir." And the teacher let him off.

The little Daniel Webster story is suspiciously similar to a joke Lincoln read in "Quin's Jests". In the Quin book a yarn is told about Quin, Colly Cibber and some other actors discussing each others' infirmities at dinner. Quin said to Cibber, "What in the name of wonder could ever make you think yourself a proper figure for the stage -- a snuffling fellow without a nose and a pair of bandy legs?" Cibber replied, "As to my nose, that I give up, but I'll lay a bottle of claret there's a worse leg in this company than this," -- at the same time showing his right leg. Nobody accepted the challenge. Whereupon Cibber said, producing his left leg -- "There's a worse one!"

Both the Webster story and this one, of course, are based on the same person unexpectedly exhibiting another limb, which in some respect is inferior to its counterpart.

I could give other examples of Mr. Lincoln's talent as a joke

"switcher" -- and I'll be delighted to give them at the end of this talk, if anyone wishes to hear more on this subject.

Of course, some of Lincoln's stories were the result of his own observation of actual happenings, things which had occurred, and had come to his attention. When Lincoln was in the White House, a visitor brought up the name of Thompson Campbell, an old Springfield friend of the President's.

"Ah, said Lincoln, "Campbell used to be a dry fellow. For a time, he was Secretary of State. One day, during the legislative vacation, a meek, cadaverous man with a white neck cloth, introduced himself to him at his office, and stating that he had been informed that Mr. Campbell had the letting of the Assembly Chamber, said that he wished to secure it, if possible, for a course of lectures he desired to deliver in Springfield. 'May I ask,' Campbell said, 'what is to be the subject of your lectures?' 'Certainly,' was the reply, with a very solemn expression. 'The lectures I wish to deliver are on the Second Coming of our Lord.' 'If you'll take my advice,' said Campbell, 'you won't waste your time in this city. It is my private opinion that if the Lord has been in Springfield once, he won't come the second time.'"

Lincoln didn't consider this story, or the lizard story, as being sacrilegious. He probably didn't even bother his head about that point. He could find his humor in the Bible, or in a manure pile. The important thing to him was to extract the wit, wherever he found it. The gem of wit was important, not its setting.

When Lincoln was traveling the Eighth Circuit District in Illinois, in the evenings Judge David Davis would gather the favored

few in a room of the hotel in which they were staying, and story telling contests would be held. Lincoln, as the champion of story tellers, would, of course, be there, when he wasn't at a magic lantern or minstrel show. There's no doubt that many of the stories Lincoln later told, he acquired by listening to the tales of his fellow contestants -- most of them other lawyers.

Of course, sometimes, funny things would happen while Lincoln was following the Circuit, and later they might become part of his repertoire. There was the time Judge Davis, a very mammoth of a man, who could stomach bad legal arguments more easily than bad food -- although he was certainly used to both -- was served some unusually fine beef in a backwoods inn. The judge, knowing the difficulties of catering in such remote places, after complimenting the landlord on the quality of his meat, said, "When you want meat in a place like this, you must have to kill a whole critter." "Yes, replied the landlord, "we never kill less than a whole critter." This, Lincoln banked in his story account, for future withdrawal.

But the fact that a man has a fund of stories -- that a man has a prodigious memory for them, or writes them down as an aide-memoire -- and Lincoln had both the memory and wrote them down -- doesn't make him a master story teller. The fact that a man has a rich sense of humor -- an appreciation of the comic so sensitive that he becomes convulsed with laughter when his funnybone is even delicately struck, this doesn't make him a master story teller. His is a talent that must be painless-takingly developed. Appreciation of a good story and the ability to tell one is the

difference between the artist's audience and the artist.

Implicit in one's being this kind of artist, is the possession of a keen sense of humor. And you're either born with a sense of humor, or you're not. It isn't something you acquire. The very earliest writings we have of Lincoln's, two of the first three verses of his in Volume One of "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln", are semi-humorous. He wrote them in his sum book, when he was fifteen or sixteen years old:

"Abraham Lincoln,
his hand and pen
he will be good but
God knows when."

And:

"Abraham Lincoln is my name
And with my pen I wrote the same
I wrote in both haste and speed
And left it here for fools to read."

No one is certain whether or not Lincoln originated these lines or whether they were traditional in his family. But they do seem to indicate a humorous bent at an early age. He did, a few years later, write some satirical verses -- really more in the nature of burlesque -- called "The Chronicles of Reuben". They weren't very good -- Lincoln certainly was no Backwoods Ogden Nash -- but this was early Lincoln. But even in "The Chronicles of Reuben", Lincoln showed a feeling for the ludicrous -- the ridiculous -- the exaggerated -- that are hallmarks of typically American humor.

Later, Lincoln could tell of a farmer who bragged about the

size of one year's hay crop. According to Lincoln, the farmer claimed it was so big, that when harvest time came, "we stacked all we could outdoors, and then we put the rest of it in the barn." In describing his own impatience with people who talked in circles and made themselves hard to understand, Lincoln said, "It reminded him of a little Frenchman out west, during the winter of the deep snow, whose legs were so short that, as he walked, the seat of his trousers rubbed out his footprints." This is robust hyperbole -- American sockdologer humor, brother to the same fabric of which Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan are woven. And yet, indicative of Lincoln's basic common sense, is that fact that in so many of his humorous exaggerations, when used as similes, there are tough grains of reality.

For instance, his description of an attorney who wrote an overlong brief, concerning which Lincoln said, "It's like the lazy preacher that used to write long sermons and the explanation was, he got to writin' and was too lazy to stop." The fact, of course, is that it does take much more effort to write concisely, to compress ideas into few words, than to over-write.

Parenthetically, Lincoln once talking about a certain blowhard, said, "He can compress the most words in the fewest ideas of any man I ever met."

Lincoln's humor is far more than something to be laughed at, or with -- or as some few do -- and as many in his time did -- either deprecated, or looked upon tolerantly as a weakness in an otherwise great man. In showing his reaction to various situations, it's in many ways a chart of his character.

His tenderness -- his love and tolerance of children, and particularly his own, are brought out in the "Doll Jack" incident, as described by Julia Taft Bayne, in "Tad Lincoln's Father." Tad had a Zouave doll, named Jack, which had been sent to him from the Sanitary Commission fair in New York. He and his two playmates, Bud and Holly Taft, would regularly court-martial Jack, find him guilty of sleeping on post or desertion, and sentence him to be shot at sunrise. After Jack's "execution", the boys would dig a grave among the new roses in the White House gardens, and Jack would be buried with full military honors. Although Julia Taft, the young realist, would inform the lads that condemned soldiers are not buried with full military honors, they liked the ritual too well not to give Jack the complete treatment. As you can well imagine, Major Watt, the White House head gardener, was not at all happy to have his rose beds dug up to make a final resting place for Jack -- final, that is, until the next day or so, when Jack would be exhumed, resurrected, condemned and executed all over again. So one day he suggested to the boys that they get Jack pardoned. Tad's enthusiasm for this project was immediate and with a "Come on, Bud, we'll get Pa to fix up a pardon," from Tad, the three boys ran upstairs to the President's private office.

While they were having an argument with John Hay, who felt that Tad was something of a little Lincolnian monster, and who was trying to keep them out of the President's office, Lincoln himself appeared at the door and invited them in. When Tad made known his request, the President said, "You know, Tad, it's not usual to grant pardons without some sort of hearing. You tell me why you

think Jack should have a pardon." When Tad explained that Jack was being shot as a spy or deserter nearly every day and they were ruining the rose gardens, burying him, Lincoln, after considering the argument gravely, but obviously trying to restrain a smile, replied, "Yes, Tad, I think you've made a case. It's good law that no man shall twice be put in jeopardy of his life for the same offense and you've already shot and buried Jack a dozen times. I guess he's entitled to his pardon." And Lincoln wrote a few words on a piece of paper and handed it to Tad: "The Doll Jack is pardoned, by order of the President. -- A. Lincoln."

What amazing patience with children. What gentle humor!

By the way, a week later, Jack was found hanging with a cord around his neck from a tree. Tad said, in spite of the pardon, Jack had gone back to spying.

Lincoln's humility is pointed up by the fact that he often told stories in which he, himself, was the butt of the joke. The jackknife story was one example. Another one of the stories he told on himself concerned the time a hard-boiled Democrat stepped up to him in Decatur right after the Republican State Convention had nominated him for the Presidency.

As Lincoln related it, the Democrat had said, "So you're Abe Lincoln. They say you're a self made man." "Yes," Lincoln had replied. "In a way, I suppose, I am self made." "Well," said the Democrat, "all I've got to say is, it was a damned bad job!"

During the war, Lincoln became acquainted with this story and he probably led the laughter when he told it.

Two Quakeresses were in a railroad coach, talking. One of

them, speaking of Davis, said, "I think Jefferson will succeed."

"Why does thee think so," asked the other.

"Because Jefferson is a praying man."

"And so is Abraham a praying man."

"Yes," came the reply, "but the Lord will think that Abraham is joking."

(Note! A man who has no vices, has damned few virtues.)

These are but two of the many stories Lincoln told on himself. His retorts to Douglas, related earlier, are examples of Lincoln's ability to think quickly on his feet when he had to. Another instance of this, and of his sensitivity to another man's possible embarrassment and his desire to relieve it -- his consideration in other words -- occurred when a visitor from Ohio was interviewing the President. A regiment, which had arrived outside the White House, set up a yell for the President to make a speech. Lincoln invited the Ohio man outside on the portico with him. Suddenly a Presidential aide stepped up to the visitor who was at Lincoln's side, and told him he'd have to step back a few paces. Instantly, Lincoln said, "If you didn't they might not know who was President."

Lincoln's essential earthiness is indicated in a comic piece that might have been original with him but which, at any rate, according to Jesse W. Weik, he wrote down and gave to the Bailiff of one of the Springfield Courts. In this piece, Lincoln partly used the elementary device of transposing and exchanging the first letters of, in most instances, adjoining words -- and partly of transposing words themselves out of proper sequence.

Here is a portion of this bit of tom-foolery: "He said he was

riding bass-ackwards on a jass-ack through a patton-cotch on a pair of baddle-sags stuffed full of binger-gred, when the animal, steered at a scump and the lirrup-steather broke and threwed him in the forner of the kence and broke his pishing fole. He said about bray dake he came to himself, ran home, seized up a stick of wood and split the axe to make a light, rushed into the house and found the door sick abed and his wife standing open. But thank goodness she is getting right hat and farty again."

As you can see, Lincoln, who came from the backwoods, had no delicacy about getting into the back-house.

Lincoln's love of practical jokes, his power of ridicule which was considerable as a young man and which he developed until it became one of the most powerful weapons in his forensic arsenal -- a weapon which could be devastating because he was a superb mimic -- his youthful animal spirits and, yes, his sometimes youthful thoughtlessness, are all exposed in the "Chronicles of Reuben" episode.

Lincoln's sister, Sarah, had married Aaron Grigsby, a member of the leading family in Gentryville, Indiana. Sarah died in 1828, in childbirth -- and possibly because Abraham felt his sister had been badly treated by the Grigsbys, there was ill feeling. So much so that when Aaron's brothers Reuben and Charles, married Betsy Ray and Matilda Hawkins on the same day, Lincoln wasn't invited to the wedding. However, he got even. After the infare at the Grigsbys, the brides were taken upstairs and placed in beds to await their respective bridegrooms. Lincoln, however, had induced somebody on the inside to either put the brides in the

wrong beds, or take the bridegrooms upstairs and bed them next to the wrong brides. Whatever happened, it was undoubtedly pretty dark. Before any harm was done -- or illicit joy enjoyed -- the mistake was discovered. Lincoln then proceeded to write up this episode in pseudo-scriptural style, calling this parody "The Chronicles of Reuben" and causes the Chronicles to be circulated throughout Gentryville. He then compounded his felonious humor by writing some very bad doggerel about another Grigsby brother, William. And what he said shouldn't have happened to a doggerel. Part of this verse is as follows:

"I will tell you a joke about Joel and Mary,
 It is neither a joke nor a story.
 For Reuben and Charles have married two girls,
 But Billy has married a boy.
 The girls he had tried on every side,
 But none could he get to agree;
 All was in vain, he went home again,
 And since that, he's married to Natty."

This verse wouldn't have been printed in the New Yorker, but it might have made "Confidential". You can well imagine the embarrassment all this caused the Grigsbys, and according to Herndon, after Lincoln's authorship was disclosed, it led to a fist fight between William Grigsby and John Johnston -- who was appointed Lincoln's representative in this matter, since the future President was far too physically powerful an antagonist for the libelled William.

It's only fair to point out that the "Chronicles of Reuben"

are not printed in the "Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln", the editors feeling there is some doubt as to their being of Lincoln's composition. However, Herndon says that the "Chronicles of Reuben" in Lincoln's own handwriting came to light in 1865, discovered by the son of a carpenter who had been rebuilding a house belonging to one of the Grigsbys and that these papers were found hidden under a rafter. Sandburg accepts their authenticity, in both his earlier "Abraham Lincoln" and in his new one volume edition. I feel that the entire incident smacks very strongly of the youthful Lincoln.

His indulgence of his gift for ridicule nearly led to fatality in 1842. On August 27th of that year, Lincoln wrote one of the four so-called Rebecca letters printed in the Sangamo Journal -- letters signed with the nom de plume Rebecca. Lincoln's contribution, which mercilessly and tastelessly lampooned the state auditor of accounts, James Shields, led to his being challenged to a duel by Shields. After a number of verbal and written exchanges, serious in intent, but in effect serio-comic and so complicated they would have done credit to Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors", the duel was called off.

But this was a lesson Lincoln never forgot and from then on, he was more restrained. Lincoln's wit was never of the delicate rapier type. In his earlier life, it smacked more of the club or broadsword. Later it mostly had the homeliness and often the sharpness of an old fashioned, straight edged razor. But he would still use the club, on occasion.

He could pad the club, if necessary, to overcome opposition -- softening a command that was yet more of a command because of a

semi-humorous approach. November 11th, 1863, he wrote to Stanton, "I personally wish Jacob R. Freese of New Jersey to be appointed a colonel for a colored regiment regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar's hair."

Lincoln's humor was a handy tool with multiple purposes. As Lamon said, it was "a labor saving device." He could use it to turn down gently a request he didn't want to grant. A Judge Baldwin, desiring a pass to see a brother in Virginia, finally got to Lincoln. When he told the President his request for the pass had been refused by both Halleck and Stanton, Lincoln smiled and said, "Well then, I can do nothing; for you must know that I have very little influence with this administration." Lincoln, who as we know, often over-rode both Stanton and Halleck, just didn't think it was worth doing this time.

He would sometimes use a story to conclude interviews the continuation of which would accomplish nothing. Late in the war, a delegation of clergymen came to see Lincoln, complaining that the character of many regimental chaplains was notoriously bad and urging a change in the system of their selection. When Lincoln pointed out that the government could do nothing, as the chaplains were chosen by the various regiments themselves, the clergymen persisted. Lincoln ended the interview by telling a little story -- "without," as he said, "any disrespect to you gentlemen." He told about a little colored boy named Dick, whom he once saw digging with his toe in a mud-puddle, making, so he said, a church. The little boy went on to point out the various parts of his muddy creation -- the church steps, front door, pews and the pulpit.

Lincoln, so the President continued, finally asked him why he didn't make a minister.

"Laws," answered the boy, with a grin, "I h'ain't got mud enough!"

Not the most tactful story to tell a group of clergymen, but it accomplished its purpose. They left!

Lincoln would often use a story as a short cut to clear up a point. A senator opposed an appointment which a party of politicians wished to have made. Lincoln said he believed that with a little tact and diplomacy the senator could be swung over. And then he gave an illustration, from his legal background, to show what he meant. Once, after a Tennessee attorney named Quarles, had rested his case in court, the defense produced a witness who swore Quarles completely out of court and he lost the case. Afterwards, a friend asked Quarles why he hadn't gotten "that fellow to swar on your side?"

"I didn't know anything about him," Quarles replied.

"I might have told you about him," said his informant. "For he would swar for you just as hard as he would for the other side. That's his business, Judge. That feller takes in swarin' for his business."

So Lincoln pointed out that the Senator, by being properly talked to, would easily switch sides. He took in switching sides "for his business."

Lincoln had a genius for characterization. Once, in telling of the difference between him and Stanton, he was reminded of a man who had a bulldog, who could whip the bark out of any other dog in

the vicinity. When asked how it was his dog could outscrap all the others, the owner answered that there was nothing odd about it. He said, "Your dog and other dogs get half through a fight before they're ready. My dog is always mad!" Stanton was always mad.

He would use humor to oil the engine of conversation and get it to run more smoothly. David Homer Bates, the telegrapher, tells how when Chase was trying to raise money with which to carry on the war, some New York financial bigwigs came to the telegraph office for an interview with Lincoln. The spokesman apologized by saying that he didn't like to find fault with the President, but ...

Whereupon, Lincoln smoothed the way by saying, "Never mind. Go ahead with your story. You remind me of a grandson who threatened to whip his grandfather, but refrained from doing so because he was his grandfather. The old man said, 'Come on, I waive the grandfather.' Gentlemen, go ahead with your plan. I waive the presidency."

He could and did use a humorous, picturesque turn of speech to controvert an argument and drive his own point home. When during the 1864 campaign, a friend begged him to step into the middle of the Republican intra-party brawl that was threatening to lose the election, Lincoln replied, "I learned a great many years ago, that in a fight between husband and wife, a third party should never get between the woman's skillet and the man's axe-helve."

He would tell a story to cheer up a melancholy friend, such a one, for instance, as the balloon ascension before the war in New Orleans, when the aeronaut finally made a descent in a cotton field, where a gang of slaves was working.

The balloonist, attired in silks and spangles, like a circus performer, stepped out of the basket to find that all the Negroes, except one old man, had run into the woods in fright. The old man was too rheumatic to run. As the splendidly arrayed aeronaut approached, having just dropped down from the sky, the Negro, who prided himself on having good manners, took his hat in hand and said, "Good mornin', Massa Jesus. How's your pa?"

Lincoln might have been reminded of this story by someone who was excessively courteous.

Lincoln would not only help dissipate the blues of a melancholy friend; he would lighten his own gloom with a story, to relieve the terrible tension under which he was laboring. The radical element of his party was bringing almost unbearable pressure on him to free the slaves before he was ready to do it. He told Senator Henderson of Missouri, that in particular three leaders, Sumner, Thad Stevens and Wilson simply haunted him and that wherever he went they were on his trail. Looking out the window on Pennsylvania Avenue, suddenly he smiled and told Henderson of the school he attended where all the reading was done from the Scriptures and the pupils stood up in a long line and read from the Bible in turn. The lesson one day, concerned the Israelites who were thrown into the fiery furnace. One little fellow was the first in class to have to read the names of the three Israelites. As Lincoln told it, "He stumbled on Shadrach, floundered on Meshach and went all to pieces on Abed-nego." The schoolmaster cuffed him and left him yelling and blubbering. The boy quieted down as others took up the lesson.

As the first boy's turn to read approached again, he suddenly started wailing like a banshee, even alarming the schoolmaster who inquired, "What's the matter now?"

The lad pointed with a shaking finger at the verse, which he would soon have to read, and quavered, "Look there, marster -- there comes them same damn three fellers again."

Whereupon the President, smiling broadly, beckoned Henderson to the window and pointed to three men who were crossing Pennsylvania Avenue towards the White House. They were Sumner, Wilson and Thad Stevens. This is another proof of Lincoln's ability to either ad lib, or immediately call from the recesses of his memory an appropriate story.

Parenthetically, some of the most picturesque expressions that are now part and parcel of our language were popularized and made common property through funny stories Lincoln told. One of these came up when a Confederate commissioner in February, 1865, told Lincoln that, if the slaves were freed, since they were used to working under compulsion, they wouldn't work and whites and Negroes would starve together. The President was reminded of a man in Illinois who raised a large herd of hogs. To feed them, he decided to plant a great field of potatoes, and when they were grown, turn the hogs loose in the field and let them go to work on the tubers, thus saving himself the labor of feeding the hogs and digging up the potatoes, as well.

When a neighbor asked him what would happen when the frost came early as it always did and the ground froze a foot deep, the hog raiser was puzzled for a moment and then he stammered, "Well,

it may come pretty hard on their snouts, but it looks to me like it will be root hog or die!" A comic story helps enrich the American tongue.

Lincoln's humor wasn't appreciated by everybody. It certainly, for instance, wasn't by Stanton. When on September 22, 1862, the Cabinet was gathered for final discussion of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln opened the meeting by announcing that he would read a chapter from a book sent him by Artemus Ward -- a chapter called "High Handed Outrage at Utiky", that he had found very funny. In this moment fraught with grave consequences for the nation, the President undoubtedly felt he needed, what was for him, the same thing as that "drink for a toper." Something to "put new life in him" -- and as a good host, he wanted to share the stimulant with his companions. The other members of the Cabinet, used to Lincoln's ways, seemed to enjoy the reading -- all except Stanton who sat there glowering and grim as death. ((Stanton, of course, was "always mad".))

I doubt if his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, always appreciated Lincoln's humor either. It couldn't have been too much fun to be awakened from a deep sleep, as often happened, so that the President in his nightshirt could read them the latest effusions of his favorite comic writers, Charles Farrar Browne or Artemus Ward; Robert W. Newell, creator of the Orpheus C. Kerr character -- a pun on "Office Seeker"; David R. Locke, who fathered Petroleum V. Nasby; or Halpine, author of Private Miles O'Reilly; or Lieutenant Desky, author of Phoenixiana. But Lincoln was gregarious, and he enjoyed his fun more if others could participate

in it with him.

But his sense of humor, his love of telling funny stories and of reading drolleries made Lincoln vulnerable, especially to those, of course, who did not like him and who would have seized on almost any excuse to bulwark those reasons for detesting the man, anyway.

Besides there are sourpusses and even those who enjoy a good laugh, or a good story themselves, but who think that a President or even a Presidential candidate who does the same, is too light a man for the serious responsibilities of office. They could be easily persuaded that their President was a clown.

Some of the most devastating attacks on Lincoln were those in which his reputation as a humorist was a prime factor. For instance, a cartoon published by Currier and Ives in 1864, and called "Running the Machine" shows Secretary of the Treasury Fessenden, turning the crank of Chase's Patent Greenback Mill, and, referring to Lincoln and the other members of his cabinet in the cartoon, says, "These are the greediest fellows I ever saw. With all my exertions, I can't satisfy their pockets, though I keep this mill going day and night." Lincoln's other secretaries are lampooned, while Lincoln is shown, his hands grasping his vest, and looking ceilingward, while he says, "All this reminds me of a most capital joke." The idea being that the cabinet was a collection of incompetents, but it all seemed very funny to Lincoln.

In Harper's Weekly, of January 3, 1863, a cartoon appeared showing Lincoln and Stanton in front of the War Department. An indignant figure of Columbia, a symbol of the nation, points angrily towards the President. "Where," she demands, "are my 15,000 sons,

murdered at Fredericksburg!"

Lincoln, his hand on the shoulder of an undersized Union officer, possibly a general, is saying, "This reminds me of a little joke." And Columbia retorts, "Go tell your joke at Fredericksburg."

One of the most vicious attacks on Lincoln -- unfair, mendacious, malignant -- gained currency and was believed by many, because of his reputation as a man who liked to have fun. September 9, 1864, the New York World printed an article that concerned the President's visit to the Antietam battlefield, the day after the battle. According to the World, "While the President was driving over the field in an ambulance accompanied by Marshall Lamon, General McClellan and another officer, heavy details of men were burying the dead. The ambulance had reached the neighborhood of the old stone bridge, where the dead were piled highest, when Mr. Lincoln, suddenly slapping Marshall Lamon on the knee, exclaimed, "Come on, Lamon, give up that song about 'Picayune Butler' (a comic air). General McClellan has never heard it." "Not now, if you please, said General McClellan with a shudder; I would prefer to hear it some other place and some other time." A cartoon was also printed in New York, making use of this malicious story and was said to have been very effective during the 1864 political campaign. Apparently, though, not effective enough.

Ward Lamon wrote an answer to this story, in response to a friendly correspondent, telling what had actually occurred, but it was never mailed, as Lincoln asked Lamon to let him try his hand at clearing up the matter. Lincoln wrote an answer, but never sent

it and it was not discovered until more than 30 years after his death. Possibly he figured he had other more important things to do, or it just slipped his mind, or he just pigeon-holed it for future reference.

What had actually occurred was that Lincoln, after visiting the wounded, including Confederate casualties, was riding with Lamon and some others in an ambulance, towards Porter's Corps. This was a number of days after Antietam. Deeply depressed by the terrible sights he had witnessed, he asked Lamon to sing one of his "sad little songs". And Lamon sang a melancholy piece called "Twenty Years Ago". It was a song at which Lincoln had wept many times before -- it was undoubtedly, at this point, catharsis for him. Lincoln's sadness increased, so Lamon without being asked, solely to give Lincoln a lift, as he thought, swung into a few lines from the minstrel air, "Picayune Butler" -- and Lincoln's gloom lightened. This was the story that had been twisted into a malevolent attack on the President. It had a grain of truth and a bushel of lies.

Carl Sandburg has called his next to the final chapter of his fourth volume of "The War Years" -- "A Tree is Best Measured When it's Down".

The tree that was Lincoln -- strong and tall, mounting upwards so that it topped the rest of the human forest, would have been stunted had it not been for the strong, nourishing juices of humor that helped give it sustenance and vitality!

them with their broad swords they beat drums and played the bagpipes. He said he could account for this inconsistent conduct no other way than by supposing that Grant had made too free with liquors during the night and became intoxicated about daylight.

THIS year we hunted up Sandusky, and down Sciota; took nearly the same route we had taken last hunting season. We had considerable success and returned to Detroit in an elm bark canoe to Canajoharie, a very ancient Indian town about nine miles above Montreal, where I remained until about the first of July. I then heard of a French ship at Montreal that had English prisoners on board, in order to carry them overseas and exchange them. I went privately off from the Indians, and also got on board, but

as General Wolfe had stopped the River St. Lawrence, we were all sent to prison at Montreal where I remained for four months. Some time in November we were all sent off from this place to Crown Point, and exchanged.

Early in the year 1760 I came home to Conococheague, and found my people could never ascertain whether I was killed or taken, until my return. They received me with great joy, but were surprised to see me so much like an Indian, both in my gait and gesture.

Upon inquiry I found that my sweetheart was married a few days before I arrived. My feelings I must leave on this occasion, for those of my readers to judge, who have felt the pangs of disappointed love, as it is impossible for me to describe the emotion of soul I felt at that time.

This concludes the portion of James Smith's journal describing his captivity.

He soon recovered from the shock of learning that his sweetheart had married. Within a year he had married another girl, acquired a large farm between Mercersburg and Fort Loudoun, and over the years raised a number of children. He became prominent in his country as a leader in opposing British military tyranny, and was a militia officer in campaigns against the Senecas and later during the Revolution he rose to the rank of colonel. He was also a delegate to the state assembly. He moved to Kentucky after the war and was prominent in church affairs and in politics. During the War of 1812 he again took up arms in defense of his country, but the aged patriot died while en route to join the army. —Editor

What's Coming in AHI

One of the United States' first offensives in the Pacific after the disasters at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, was the attempt to take Buna, on the eastern coast of New Guinea. As author Mark Sufrin shows, it was easier said than done, and exacted a high toll in sweat and blood.

Dr. Wallace H. Carothers, the Dupont Corporation's first "Fundamental Research" resident, spent years seeking to construct the largest man-made molecule in history. He succeeded, and in the offing discovered and developed a synthetic textile which, for want of a better name, was called "nylon."

Braddock's Defeat ranks among the most famous military disasters in American history. Among those who lived to tell the story of just what happened on that fateful day in 1755, was one of Braddock's officers of the Virginia militia who recounted his reminiscences in a memoir that has been long forgotten. The writer: George Washington.

Abraham Lincoln, for all his moodiness and melancholy, was a very funny man. Indeed, though many of the jibes attributed to him originated with others, still his peculiar sense of humor was distinctive enough to acquire a name of its own, "Lincolnesque." Mort R. Lewis, himself a noted humorist, examines the wit of this man who fought his sadness with laughter.

Probably the first black hero in America was Crispus Attucks, the Bostonian who died in 1770 in another of our "massacres." As such, he was of prime importance to American Negroes, slave and free, in the years to come, for they desperately wanted an idol of their own. Dr. Benjamin Quarles tells the story of the man and his image, and what both did for his people.

Nov 1970

Happy birthday, Mr. Lincoln (and say it with a smile)

By Mort R. Lewis

It is no news that President Reagan has a talent for relating anecdotes and quipping to make a point. In this he is far from alone among presidents; FDR did, too, and to a lesser degree, Harry Truman. But compared with the president whose birthday we celebrate today — not only as a master comic storyteller and quipster, but in employing humor for many purposes, including communicating — all other chief executives must take a back seat. They're not in Abe Lincoln's league.

Lincoln was subject to the "hypo," as he called it — deep fits of melancholy. Fortunately, an artery of humor ran through the man, nourished his lifestream and was a potent force in creating his unique personality. He himself said that humor saved his sanity. Censured by a congressman for starting to tell a funny story soon after having learned of a battlefield disaster, Lincoln said sadly, "Ashley, were it not for this vent, I would die."

Lincoln had a mobile face capable of comic expression, a flexible tongue, a gift for mimicry and that essential for any first-rate storyteller, a split-second sense of timing. His storytelling ability was finely honed in marathon competitions with other lawyers traveling the Illinois Eighth Circuit, when in the evening they would gather in a hotel room and match yarn for yarn.

His humor was a multiple-purpose tool. He sometimes used it to win over juries. Defending a man accused of assault and battery during a practically bloodless fight, Lincoln cross-examined the plaintiff, who melodramatically proclaimed his fight with Lincoln's client had covered six acres of land. Asked Lincoln mildly, "Don't you think that was a mighty small crop of fight to raise on such a large farm?" The amused jury found for Lincoln's client.

Many of the points Lincoln made through humor in his time seem relevant to ours. While a member of the Illinois Assembly, he used humor as a weapon to go after a nitpicking legislator. This man, he said, reminded him of an old frontiersman who thought he was firing his rifle at a squirrel, when he was actually shooting at a louse on his own eyebrow.

Calling the 5-cent-a-gallon gas tax a "user's fee" might be reminiscent of Lincoln's attack on Douglas' doubletalk during the famous de-

bates, when he said it was "but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words by which a man can prove a horse chestnut to be a chestnut horse."

Windy talk during recent congressional filibusters could be covered by Lincoln's description of a blowhard: "He can compress the fewest ideas into the most words of any man I ever knew."

He might have been describing a current Supreme Court justice, a strict constructionist; when he spoke of a judge who was such a legalist "that he would hang a man for blowing his nose on the street, but would quash the indictment if it failed to state which hand he blew it with."

Lincoln sometimes used humor as catharsis. Harassed by office-seekers, he came down with the varioloid, a mild form of smallpox, and quipped, "Now, at last I have something I can give everyone."

He was an expert at what we now call "switching" jokes. There is his famous retort to a delegation urging he fire Gen. Grant because the latter drank too much. The president's reply that he wished to know what brand of whiskey Grant drank so that he could send some to his other generals was a switch of an older joke in which King George II, told that Gen. Wolfe was mad, expressed the wish that Wolfe would bite some of his other generals.

Lincoln enjoyed puns, and some of them were original with him. As a lawyer, when asked to sign a mock petition donating money to repair the torn trouser seat of a fellow attorney, Lincoln wrote, "I can contribute nothing to the end in view." Pre-eminent in the Pantheon of presidential punning is this Lincoln double pun: A Captain Cutts, brother of Stephen Douglas' widow, was facing court martial after having been discovered standing on a suitcase and gawking over a hotel transom at a woman disrobing. At the time, the Scandinavian minister to this country was Edward, Count Piper. Lincoln quipped to his private secretary, John Hay, that perhaps "Captain Cutts should be elevated to the peerage with the title of Count Peeper."

Any president in conflict with Congress could envy Lincoln's reply to Senator Ben Wade. Angered at the president's refusal to remove Grant — it seems somebody always wanted Grant removed — Wade stormed into the White House and thundered, "Mr. Lincoln, you are on the road to hell, sir, with your obstinacy and you are not a mile from it this very moment."

Replied Lincoln gently, "Senator, isn't that just about the distance from here to the Capitol?" ■

Mort R. Lewis, a screenwriter living in Marina del Rey, is an authority on Lincoln's humor who has contributed to several Lincoln anthologies.

from the desk of

MORT LEWIS

I cannot guarantee the authenticity of the "Whiskey cask" or "Massa Jesus" stories, as I have not yet been able to trace them to their sources-- who was present when they were told, etc.

L. HILMOK
by MORTLELLIS

See Internal Writings

DRAWER 64

HUMOR

